THE RAIN IS A LIE

GENNIFER ALBIN

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In Arras, space and time aren't ideas, they are tangible substances woven together by beautiful girls into the very fabric of reality. The looms that create Arras are as controlled as the Spinsters who work them, ensuring a near idyllic world for the average citizen. But at what price? As an election approaches, a surprise weather forecast and a mysterious stranger hint that not all is as it seems, and a young boy learns that in Arras nothing can be trusted, not even memories. "The Rain is a Lie" is an original short story set in the world of Gennifer Albin's Crewel. The next book in the series, Altered, is available October 29th.

The Stream clicked on at 6:30 a.m., preprogrammed to begin with the start of the work day. Mrs.

Howson barely noticed it as she cracked eggs for breakfast, a red apron tied neatly at her waist to catch stray pops of oil from the pan. She had been up since five, allowing her enough time to get ready before the rest of the family began the day. Her mind was already forming a list of items to pick up from the co-op, including eggs and coffee, so the weather report didn't register with her as it should have.

Most days in Allia were pleasant. The amount of business—political and otherwise—conducted in the capital of the Eastern Sector saw that the weather remained a comfortable temperature; even the winter months were relatively mild. In other metros in the sector, one might experience snow or heat waves corresponding, of course, to economic necessity. Due to the sheer number of officials that called Allia home, the metro stayed in the 20s.

It was James' responsibility to ensure that Mrs. Howson knew if the daily weather programming was noteworthy. He took the job seriously, so he was the first member in the Howson household to note that they should expect rain this evening.

"Good morning." Mr. Howson ruffled his son's hair as he strode into the kitchen, briefcase in hand. "Anything to report?"

James nodded, joining his father at the table. "You might need an umbrella."

"Might?" Mr. Howson repeated with a raised eyebrow.

"It's scheduled to start at 5 p.m."

"I'll be on my way home," Mr. Howson said. "I will definitely want an umbrella."

"Rain?" Mrs. Howson shook her head as she set two plates of eggs and toast in front of her husband and son. "This close to an election? It's supposed to be a jubilee."

"They can't let it get too dry. It's better to do it now than wait another two weeks for the election to be finalized and the start of the official inauguration galas." Mr. Howson spoke with the air of a man

who understood exactly how his government functioned.

“But it’s the prime ministership.”

“Do you think they want it raining while they cast their votes?”

Of course, the officials would rather order rain now than wait until they were in chambers debating which of them should be elected prime minister. Not that it would take long for them to choose. As far as Mr. Howson—and most of Arras—were concerned, there was only one man

for the job.

“I suppose I’ll need an umbrella, too,” Mrs. Howson said. “I planned to go by the co-op after work.”

James abandoned his fork and gripped the table. “May I come?”

Mrs. Howson thought for a moment before she nodded. If James had been born a girl, the answer would have been no. But he was already nine years old, and wasn’t one of the perks of having a son that he could travel to the metrocenter on his own? “Take the rail down to the office after academy.” She turned toward her husband. “There’s no need to wait around the metrocenter to pick us up. We’ll take the rail back as soon as we’re finished.”

James’ eggs grew cold as he fidgeted in his seat, thinking about his adventure this afternoon. He would be allowed to travel by himself and there was a good chance his mother would let him help with the shopping at the co-op. He barely noticed when the Stream reporter announced that the evening’s shower would extend overnight.

James ran so quickly from academy to the station that he arrived half an hour before the next departure, so he wandered around, puffing out his chest and walking tall. Adults took the rail and, although James knew other boys in his class often did as well, he felt positively stuffed at the idea that he was taking it, too.

The station sat on the outskirts of town and was the preferred mode of transportation for average citizens. Important businessmen and officials could rebound from metro to metro, even to other sectors, but very few people warranted that privilege. Despite that, many of them had to get to the center of the metro for work or visit the co-op for supplies and rations. James’ mother usually did the shopping by herself after work.

An automated counter scanned privilege cards, something James was not allowed to carry with him most days. He wasn’t required to carry it until he turned ten next fall, so his mother usually wouldn’t let him. But today was special, and he clutched his card in his sweaty palm. It took him two tries to get the card to scan, and he dropped it once. Finally the small screen flashed ACCEPTED and James pushed through the metal teeth of the turnstile. The waiting platform was simple enough—a large slab of concrete. Blue benches speckled it, but few were occupied with waiting passengers.

James turned in a wide circle and took it all in—the small Daily Bulletin stand, the entrance to a café with tables scattered just outside its door, and the tracks. James had learned about the rail in academy. It reached speeds of up to one hundred kilometers per hour and traveled in a

continuous loop back and forth from the outlying neighborhoods to the metrocenter during working hours. But it hadn't yet returned from its most recent trip, so the station seemed to gape open at the edge of the platform. Thin tracks stretched past the tall platform and James looked over the edge, a shiver running through his belly. It was a long way to fall. He backed up and took to exploring the rest of the station.

There were very few people waiting for the rail at the moment. Some women with young

children milled about, probably waiting to head down to the metrocenter, too. James paced the length of the platform, pretending for a moment that he was a station attendant. He looked around, prepared for signs of trouble. He suspected that's what station attendants did. But everything was ordinary.

Everything, except for a man in a leather coat that trailed to the ground. The man was looking around, and when he was satisfied that no one was watching he sat down on a bench and

withdrew a small knife from inside his jacket. The afternoon sun glinted from the blade as he flipped it open and began to scratch something in the side of the bench.

James was frozen to the spot, watching him with wide, uncertain eyes. A proper station attendant would have gone up and stopped the man from defiling the bench, but James couldn't find the courage. The stranger had a knife! Instead he tiptoed closer to the spot, careful to stay hidden behind a stand that held the Daily Bulletin. Peering around its corner, James studied the stranger.

He didn't look like the men James saw around his neighborhood. Allia was populated by

businessmen and merchants. Some of this friends' fathers worked in shops, but even when they came home from a day working on motocarriages, they didn't look so . . . *dangerous*. None of them wore leather dusters or carried knives. James wasn't sure that knives were allowed in Arras at all.

After a few minutes, the shrill whistle of the rail broke through his thoughts. James turned to see it growing larger as it approached the station, its gears whirling and billowing steam as it chugged to a screeching halt. He looked back to the bench, but the man was gone.

A stub of a man stepped onto the platform and shouted, "All aboard!"

James hesitated, then raced toward the bench and dropped down to inspect its left arm. He found a message carved into the wood. With a trembling finger, he traced the etched letters.

The rain is a lie.

It made no sense to him. How could the rain be a lie? Rain was, after all, simply rain. But he couldn't stay and puzzle it out. Not without missing the railcar. Grabbing his bag, he dashed toward the waiting locomotive and into the passenger car. He didn't notice the stranger watch him leave.

The co-op was extremely busy for a weekday afternoon, but Mrs. Howson reasoned that a full evening of storms probably forced citizens out to pick up their rations early. She had double-checked James' weather report to discover that the precipitation would last for exactly twelve hours. By the time she woke up to get ready tomorrow it would be over.

James bounced at her side, barely able to contain his excitement, which had turned into spasms of energy. His arms and legs flailed as he jumped and spun looking at the stocked shelves surrounding him. To most it probably looked as though he'd lost control of his body. A few women nodded sympathetically as they passed, while others looked away, turning their noses up.

It was never hard to differentiate the mothers from the girls' and boys' neighborhoods.

A daughter might be more pleasant to shop with, but she would much rather have a son for *so many reasons*. She sighed as she placed her hand on James' shoulder, a subtle reminder to calm down.

He got the message and forced himself to stand tall and straight, like an adult. He was at the co-op. He had even taken the rail down by himself. Thinking of his trip, he considered telling his mother about the man at the rail station and the strange message he'd left.

He tugged on her blouse, but she was busy collecting cans off the shelf. "There was a man at the rail station," he began, launching into a description of the man and the strange words he had written in small letters on the bench.

"Mmmmm-hmmmmm." His mother nodded as she double-checked her list.

James gave up. It was impossible to catch his mother's attention when she was occupied with other tasks. Besides, he liked thinking of the man and the strange message. It felt like a secret.

He knew he wasn't supposed to have secrets, and yet it felt delicious to have one, like he had hidden away a bit of candy all for himself. Only *he* knew about the man and the message. No one else had even glanced at the bench in the station. But James had touched it, felt the letters etched into the wood.

It was almost like the man left a message for him.

When their cart was full of carefully selected items, Mrs. Howson rolled it toward the register, James trailing behind her. She noted that he was much calmer now, probably thinking about his trip on the rail. She knew that would thrill him.

The cashier exchanged pleasantries with them, and the two adults settled into a casual

conversation about tonight's weather programming.

"It will be a doozie," the woman said as she scanned each item in the cart.

"I don't see how they can justify a twelve-hour storm, especially this near an election." Mrs.

Howson disagreed with her husband about the necessity of it. Even overnight a twelve-hour storm was a nuisance, and if the Spinsters in charge weren't careful, there was likely to be mud.

The cashier shrugged, seeming to neither agree with nor care about this assessment. She planned to go home and stay inside with her husband, so it didn't matter to her one way or another. "Rain is only rain."

"The rain is a lie," James piped up, thinking of his message as the two women discussed the weather.

"What a silly thing to say." Mrs. Howson laughed nervously, shooting James a warning look and pointed at the door. "Wait outside."

The warning was entirely unnecessary because James' mouth was already clamped shut as he stalked out of the co-op. He'd given away his secret! Leaning on the brick facade of the co-op, James stroked invisible letters across the wall.

"Is that a message?" someone asked him.

James looked up to find himself face to face with the man from the rail station. James shook his head as he took in the man's long leather coat and vest. Up close, James could see that the man was unshaven and his hair was cropped close to his head. It was against the hygiene and appearance standards to look this way, but James didn't say anything. A cold ball was forming in James' stomach, and it sprouted icy tendrils that crept down his arms and up his neck.

A woman stepped from the alley that ran between the co-op and the office building next door.

Unlike James' mother, she wore no cosmetics and she was clad in tight leather pants. James had never seen a woman in pants before.

"Dante," she called. The man waved her off, and her eyes narrowed to angry slits.

Dante knelt down and pulled a bit of a chalk from his pocket. In small, precise letters he wrote the message again.

The rain is a lie.

James swallowed against the ice that had reached his throat, but it sat like a lump there, making his whole body feel numb.

"Don't forget," Dante whispered, and he grabbed James' hand as he spoke.

James nodded. He didn't understand what the man meant, not by the words he spoke or the message he wrote.

"James!" His mother called his name sharply and James backed away from the man. The man stood and turned, moving toward the alley where the woman waited for him. As he did James noticed the shape of an hourglass imprinted behind his ear like it had been burned there. Then Dante slid back

into the shadows where he belonged.

“James!” This time when his mother called his name it was a command, not a request. James took one final look toward the alley’s mouth before he returned to his mother’s side.

Other than a sideways glance from the cashier, neither woman had said anything more about the rain, and Mrs. Howson had fled the co-op, lost in her thoughts, only to discover her son talking with a strange man. It hadn’t taken much to startle the man away, which made Mrs. Howson all the more convinced that she’d saved her son from a deviant.

Her heart fluttered as she led him back to the rail station. One heard of deviants, of course, but to encounter one in public—and *so old*! The Guild usually caught them early. And there had been a woman, too. She clutched James’ hand so tightly that he tried to tug it away, but she wouldn’t let go until they were safely on the rail.

He was only nine, she told herself. He didn’t know better than to talk to strangers. Arras was safe, but between the deviants and James’ strange remark at the co-op, Mrs. Howson’s nerves rattled around like a tin of loose marbles. It was never good to talk about lying, especially in public. The Guild frowned on lying. Not that his silly statement meant anything.

As the rail clattered home, she watched James fidget in his seat, trying to get a better view from the window. The more she thought about it, the more she relaxed. In the future she would do her shopping alone. She barely noticed the purposeful stroke of James’s finger on the glass, and by the time the first drop of rain hit her forehead and she opened her umbrella, juggling her bag of rations, she’d forgotten it completely.

The rain fell in sheets, heavy and purposeful. No one in the Howson house could recall such a downpour, and Mr. Howson made a number of ill-conceived jokes about the Spinster in charge of the storm over the course of dinner. Mrs. Howson focused on fussing over everyone’s plates, trying to ignore the horrible thrill that surged through her at each mention of the rain.

James could think of only one thing, and he didn’t speak during dinner.

As his mother washed and dried the dishes from the evening meal, he slipped out the back door.

He padded onto the grass, his feet bare, and felt the ground squish between his toes. Rain splatted in fat drops across his face, and he blinked it from his eyes, but the rain lingered on his lashes like unwanted tears. James could feel it—how it soaked into his shirt and slid in slick trails down his skin. Somewhere in the Eastern Coventry a girl was weaving this storm into the sky over head. She made the rain possible. She made the rain real. He had no doubt of it.

“James Howson!” his mother screamed from the back porch. “Get in the house this minute!”

He looked back through the veil of rain and then around the yard one last time as a bolt of lightning splintered across the sky. Overhead the clouds rumbled, and the thunder vibrated across his chest, setting his heart to beat wildly.

What the man had meant, James couldn't guess, and as his mother yanked his soaked clothes over his head and past his feet, James realized it must have been a trick. A joke. That was the only explanation that made sense. James had seen it with his own eyes and felt it on his skin. The rain was as real as the house sheltering him now or the dry towel his mother wrapped around him.

"What were you doing?" his mother asked.

"I needed to feel the rain," he told her.

"Next time get in the bathtub. Then you won't get your feet all muddy." She scrubbed at him with a washcloth, coaxing the dirt from between his toes.

"Okay," he promised her, even as his eyes stayed on the swelling clouds outside the window.

"All this mud, and right before an election!" she muttered as she handed him a pair of pajamas.

He said goodnight quietly, not raising a fuss when his mother told him it was time for bed, and he lay under the covers listening to the rain beat lies across the roof until his eyelids grew heavy.

There was no mud outside the next morning. Not a drop of rain clung to the grass when James snuck out the screen door as his mother made breakfast.

Mrs. Howson hummed over the stove as she cracked eggs. She was pleased to discover this morning that there was no need to go to the co-op. Usually she ran so low on rations by mid-week that a trip after work was necessary. She could avoid another stock-up trip until the weekend—when James could stay home with his father while she went out for supplies. A young boy had no business in the metrocenter, especially in the non-segregated co-ops. The Guild should really put stricter limits on public places, she thought as she marveled at the stupidity of parents who exposed their children to the dangers of the metrocenter before they were ready.

She would certainly never take her son to the co-op.

As she laid the plates on the table, she looked around for James, but he wasn't in the living room.

Her husband was already seated, absorbed in the Daily Bulletin. Mrs. Howson brushed her hands off on her apron and wandered to the door. James was on the front lawn, kneeling in the grass.

She opened the door and called out his name. He turned toward her, then looked at the grass once more before he darted back into the house.

"There's no mud," he told her.

“Why would there be mud?” she asked as she poured milk into a glass and placed it in front of him.

“It rained last night,” he said. It had poured all night. James had woken several times in the night to a crack of thunder, but there was no trace of moisture outside this morning.

Mr. Howson peeked from behind the Bulletin. “That wasn’t in the programming.”

“It started at 5 o’clock,” James reminded him.

“I think you must have dreamed it,” his mother said, pushing his plate closer to him.

She was trying to distract him. His mother disliked it when he talked nonsense.

“I heard it!” James protested.

“Now James . . .” His father’s voice trailed away in warning, and James fell silent.

It had rained last night. James had heard it, and he remembered the weather programming report from yesterday morning, but most of all he remembered the strange man and his words.

“They would never schedule rain this close to an election,” Mrs. Howson explained, and her husband nodded in agreement.

“But . . .” The objection fell from James’ lips as he thought of the final words of the man at the co-op.

Don’t forget.

James finished his breakfast and gathered his bag for academy. He kissed his mother on the cheek and headed out the front door. But when he reached the end of the street he went in the opposite direction.

Most of the commuter rails had already left the station. Everyone left in the neighborhoods, including his parents, would drive to work. Today there was no strange man. James thought of the words written in chalk at the co-op. The rain would have washed them away, but the man had etched the warning into the bench. It would still be there.

James nearly tripped over his feet as he ran. A station attendant called for him to slow down, but James kept going. He was breathless when his knees hit the seat of the bench. Gasping for air, he leaned toward the left arm of the bench.

The paint was pristine, without a single mark.

James thought he was mixed up. He scooted down to the other end to discover that the paint was perfect there, too. He got up and moved slowly from bench to bench. Their blue paint gleamed, spotless, clean, and utterly untouched. He thought for a moment that someone must have painted them. Perhaps someone had complained about the message.

But it had rained last night. No one could have painted it then, and even if they had, the benches were

dry. There was no hint of wet paint.

Or rain.

James slung his bag over his shoulder and shuffled toward the street, stopping only to toss a loose page of the Daily Bulletin in the trash. He glanced at the headline. Another story about Cormac Patton's campaign to be prime minister, but no mention of the rain.

The rain was a lie.

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